

# Star Wars call

**HARRISON FORD'S** story is almost too good to be true. After 12 failed years in Hollywood, the handsome actor hit the big time of fame and fortune.

He is rumored to be the richest actor in the world. Five of his films — the Star Wars trilogy and the Indiana Jones duo — are among the nine biggest grossers in movie history.

Ford has a percentage of each. Recently he appeared in two of Peter Weir's films: *Witness* and *The Mosquito Coast*.

Yet even as Ford's fame and fortune rises, information about him lessens.

He is notoriously private, shuns the bright lights of Hollywood and protects his personal life fiercely.

**MINTY CLINCH** uncovers the real Harrison Ford . . .



**HARRISON Ford** is the sort of man you would be proud to introduce to your mother.

Tall, dark-blond and handsome, modest, polite and neat, you could imagine him addressing her as "Ma'am" with the courtesy of a southern gentleman which he is not and smiling his shy, unassuming smile.

Ford has star quality, the genuine, gilt-edged article, the kind they aren't supposed to make any more.

It's the kind you notice in the *Star Wars* trilogy, the *Indiana Jones* epics and the likes of *Witness*.

Not that Ford the man has any belief in Ford the star.

"I want to be recognised for the job I do, which is acting," he says.

"That's what I get paid for, not for touting myself around as a fascinating personality."

"I'm really quite incapable of doing that. I don't consider myself unique. I just work in the movie business."

Ford doesn't just work in the film industry — he happens to be at the top of the tree.

Today, with percentages in five of the nine biggest money-makers in history, Ford must be among America's highest earners, a thought that excites him not at all.

"Money is only important when you don't have it," he comments with the authority of one who has known poverty and in the certainty that he will never know it again.

The money is invested by his money manager and there is a distinct impression that the self-styled modest family man might find it hard to unload even a fraction of the income.

Certainly he is not in the spend, spend, spend mould.

He hates parties, especially Hollywood ones, and has no taste for exotic holidays.

He likes being at home, either a luxury house in a cul-de-sac above Beverly Hills or, better still, in the remote rural fastness of Wyoming.

He keeps up the Los Angeles connection for his two sons, Ben and Willard, who live with his first wife, Mary, eight kilometres down the road.

His second wife is Melissa Mathison, she who gave the world *ET*.

His movies have ranged from the disastrous (*Hanover Street* and *The Frisco Kid*) through the mediocre (*Blade Runner*) to the spectacular (the *Star Wars* trilogy, *Indiana Jones* and *Witness*).

He is a man who looks at acting the way he looks at carpentry, which earned him a living before the big time: as a craft rather than an art.

For Ford, roles are like pieces of furniture: some are more complicated than others, but

each requires understanding and precision if it is to fulfil its function.

Harrison Ford is more sophisticated than his material.

He wouldn't go to see his own films — indeed he wouldn't go and see any film, not even *Casablanca*, as he has frequently said.

He'd rather read a good book or visit a museum.

It's a habit he's had from childhood — a childhood spent in and around Chicago.

For a notoriously private man, Ford's greatest triumph has been in concealing the details of his earliest years. But there is no secret about his birthday, July 13, 1942, nor his birthplace, Chicago, nor the suburban affluence in which his parents lived.

His father comes from an Irish Catholic family, his mother from a Russian Jewish one.

Ford's grandfather had been in vaudeville and his father

had done a stint as a radio actor, so there was an element of show business in the family.

When World War II finished, Ford senior became an advertising executive.

"He was a pioneer of television commercials," Ford says.

## 6 Tossed coin went to California

"He certainly seemed to have a lot more interesting job than a lot of the other guys' dads. This may sound silly, but it encouraged me not to want a real job."

As a result, much of Ford's childhood was spent in not preparing to have one.

He was lazy — a slow, reluctant learner with no ambitions to rival his high-achieving father.

He describes himself as a loner with a liking for books which never became a passion. Indeed, he wasn't passionate about anything and had no interest in games.

"I wasn't a sissy or anything like that. I probably went upstairs and read a book or cleaned up my room," Ford says.

"My family didn't go in for dressing up and play-acting."

"The idea that anyone could make a living out of acting only came to me later on."

When Ford left high school, his grades were good enough to get him into Rippon College, in North Wisconsin.

He acknowledges that his studies in English literature and philosophy were half-hearted and much interrupted by long lie-ins and pizza.

"Eventually it became clear to me that I hadn't a clue how I would make a living out of those two subjects, so I just

stopped going to classes," Ford says.

But Rippon College wasn't a complete disaster, for it introduced him to the stage and his wife-to-be.

"Standing up there in front of an audience of 600 people was the most challenging thing in my young life."

"Come to think of it, it scared me half to death, but I felt compelled to deal with that fear by doing it again," Ford says.

"Eventually I realised it was a career choice. I never came up with a suitable alternative."

So he followed college with a season of summer repertory.

Then, on a bleak September morning in 1963, in the middle of America, Harrison Ford stood and looked east, then west.

He pulled a coin out of his pocket and spun it in the air. It came down for New York.

"It was snowing hard although it was so early in the year, so I tossed it again and again until it showed California."

"I knew I'd probably be poor and hungry. I didn't plan on being cold as well."

Nor did he go alone, having married his long-term sweetheart Mary in the summer of his non-graduation.

The drive to California was a honeymoon, a voyage into the unknown with the Pacific as its destination.

At Laguna Beach, south of Los Angeles, Ford spent a season with the Laguna Playhouse. He was spotted by a scout from Columbia's New Talent program who was intrigued by the boyish leading man and called him into head office for further negotiations.

The Fords were on their way — or so it seemed.

He was put under contract. The pay was \$150 a week, a handsome sinecure on which a couple could live comfortably in the mid-1960s.

Every day he had to show up at the studio and attend an acting class.

"It was worse than a factory. Horrible really, because you knew no one cared a damn about you. I went nuts," Ford says.

But he was learning more about his profession and there was always a chance his number would come up.

Meanwhile, he bought a house in the Hollywood Bowl and started gutting parts of it he didn't like. That eventually left him with the walls and the roof. Then he bought tools and started replacing the rest.

His interest in carpentry had begun.

This state of suspended animation lasted 18 frustrating months before he landed a one-day part as a bellboy in *Dead Heat on a Merry-Go-Round*. There was a second role a year later in Jack Lemmon's *Luv*, then another in *Time for Killing*.

The frustration finally got to Ford and after a row with a Columbia executive he was fired on the spot.

Three days later, he signed a contract with Universal and started appearing in television series like *Gunsmoke*, *The Sodbusters* and *Wheelan's Men*.

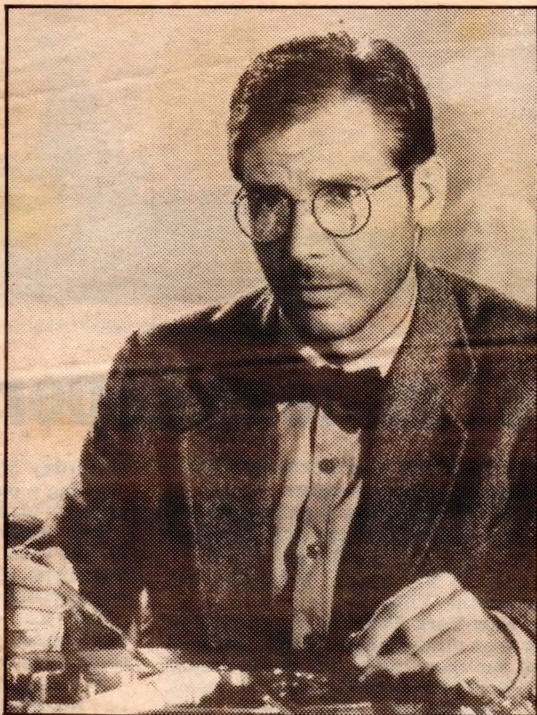
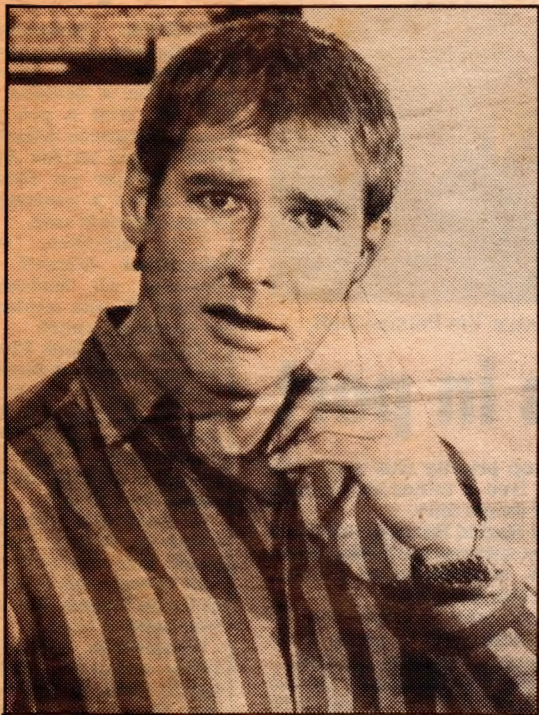
It was in these early days that Ford acquired his famous scar, the result of a car crash. He was trying to fasten his seat belt when he ran into a tree.

A string of small B-grade parts only added to Ford's frustration. Eventually, he decided he'd had enough.

"I wasn't temperamentally suited to being a studio actor."



# ended carpentry job



## From a lazy dropout to a guilt-edge star

That meant doing every damned thing they told you," he says.

"I'd invested six years of my life in the business and I didn't want to give it up, but I knew I had to get away."

Ford, at 28, was still undisciplined and idle. But he decided he'd be a carpenter.

His first professional job was to turn a garage owned by Sergio Mendes into a recording studio.

The word of mouth on that job was good and Ford was soon regularly employed, remodelling houses, building cabinets, bookshelves and furniture for wealthy patrons.

He took great pride in his newly-acquired skills. His tongue-and-grooved pieces, now collector's items, are worthy of the limelight thrust upon them.

Along with the new success came a big decision: he would not take any parts until something came up that gave him a clear career decision.

That came in 1972 with a part in George Lucas' hit *American Graffiti*.

The movie may have been a smash, but it did nothing for Ford's finances. Soon he was back working on other people's bookcases.

But he had been noticed by the new generation of filmmakers. The next to use him was Francis Coppola in a small but vital role in *The Conversation*.

Over the next three years, Ford accepted only two acting jobs, both for television.

Dispirited by reviews of both, he returned to his workbench vowing he'd never act again.

It was a hollow promise, for *Star Wars* was just around the corner. Everyone wanted to be in what promised to be the sci-

fi spectacular of the decade, courtesy of George Lucas.

Ford tested, almost with reluctance and certainly with no expectations, for the part of Han Solo along with a long list of others.

Lucas said later: "I liked Harrison from working with him on *Graffiti*. I thought he was a very talented actor and I enjoyed working with him."

### 'Radiates a strength without talk'

"But when I considered him for *Star Wars*, I was afraid of being influenced by the fact that I liked him, that I was familiar with his work, that I was thinking of him for the part because of my previous associations with him. So I did test a lot of others too."

"But I just couldn't find anybody who had his qualities as an actor and fitted my concept of the character as well as he did."

Ford asked himself whether he should accept the part of Solo, then went home and asked Mary. She said yes.

"I owe everything to Mary," Ford says.

"Without her I wouldn't be in the cinema today, because I wouldn't have accepted the part. When Lucas made me the offer, I hadn't been in front of a camera for three years."

"Mary wasn't only beautiful and kind. She gave me the confidence to accept. She pushed me back into the cinema."

At the time, Ford was working on a set of bookshelves for actress Sally Kellerman. He left his tools, his paint and his

ladder while he went off to make Lucas' movie.

He would never return to collect them — the success of *Star Wars* saw to that.

Ford sat back to consider his future and realised that if he wasn't careful he would end up typecast. The trick was to find a contrast part quickly.

He took a role in Henry Winkler's *Heroes*, a movie he doesn't like talking about.

That was followed by a small part in Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and a big change in his life.

Coppola's pretty young assistant on that film was Melissa Mathison and her meeting with Ford ended his failing 12-year marriage.

(He was divorced in 1983 and promptly married Melissa.)

"It was the cinema that separated us," Ford said later, "and I will never forgive it for that."

His next film was *Force 10 from Navarone*, another non-success.

Then came *Hanover Street*, a wartime soapie he dismisses grimly as "not one of my favorite films", and finally a part in Gene Wilder's *The Frisco Kid*.

Ford's reputation only came back on track with the return of George Lucas and *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Through the late summer of 1980, as *Empire* put his name in lights across America, the scripts poured in.

But Ford continued to renovate his new home. He'd learned something from those five interim failures: read first, sign later — or not at all.

In due course, his patience was rewarded. The script that really had his name on it was *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

It was a George Lucas-Steven Spielberg special, and they had

their eye on Tom Selleck for the part of Indiana Jones.

With Selleck out of the running through his commitments to the television series *Magnum*, Lucas and Spielberg cast around for someone else.

"We were stuck," Spielberg admitted. "We had three weeks left to cast the part of Indiana Jones and there was nobody close."

"Then I saw *The Empire Strikes Back* and I realised Harrison Ford is Indiana Jones."

He called Lucas, who agreed and said "Get him".

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* put Ford's name in lights for good. Between that and his next successes, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *The Return of the Jedi*, he made another non-hit: *Blade Runner*.

Determined to make no more, Ford was grateful when a script titled *Called Home* crossed his desk.

Later christened *Witness*, it turned into a movie which would finally establish Harrison Ford as an actor of unsuspected depth and talent.

But Ford did have concerns: "I felt that if we didn't have a really good director, the script wouldn't gain anything."

Ford suggested a series of directors' names: one was Australia's Peter Weir.

By the time shooting on *Witness* finished in 1984, Ford and Weir were firm friends.

Weir said: "The films he has been involved in have been mainly comic-book action adventures, but I feel Harrison always managed to establish quite a credible character."

"I felt quite clearly that he'd not been able to display what was there, and any lingering doubts I might have had were cleared up during our conversations before shooting actually began."

"He had a sharp mind, a very clear idea about his role and some damn good ideas about the film itself."

"It became quite a partnership."

Yes, indeed: when the Oscars for 1986 came around, there were eight nominations for *Witness*.

One was for Harrison Ford as best actor.

He did not win, but his consolation prize was the fact that the nomination has reduced to a handful the number of Hollywood luminaries who think of him as a perfectly-formed cardboard cut-out.

Steven Spielberg and Peter Weir are in the best position to assess Ford's real potential, but their comments suggest even they can't be sure.

"What is so attractive about Harrison is that you wouldn't recognise him on the street," Spielberg says.

"You wouldn't know him in a crowd, you might not even know him at a cocktail party of a dozen people. He really is a chameleon."

"When he's acting, he becomes the character he's playing and afterwards he reverts to being Harrison Ford, wood-cutter and furniture-maker."

"His magic is that he's a very accessible, common guy."

Weir likened him rather to Sean Connery.

"He has that brooding quality. He's someone who radiates strength without the need for dialogue and regardless of content. With the exception of Connery, perhaps, it is something which seems to be unique to the American experience and to the movies," he says.

"People talk about stage presence, the way some actors can walk on and dominate the stage, holding your attention with the simplest gestures or actions."

"But his quality is something different, something which has a lot to do with the power of the close-up."

"Harrison is enormously likeable."

Ford will make one more Indiana Jones film under Spielberg's direction.

Now that he's down to one film a year, he divides the majority of his time between California and Wyoming, the hideaway he heads for as soon as the cameras stop turning. He has set up a carpentry shop there and has plans to build the ultimate symbol of American backwoodsmanship: his own log cabin.

The locals have to accept him for what he is.

And what is that? A very rich man?

"Yes, I am very, very rich. That's what you want to hear, isn't it? Usually I demur when people ask me that. They also ask exactly how rich I am, but it's none of their goddam business."

Ford has acquired a reputation for being tight with his fortune, perhaps because he spends so modestly on himself and has so little liking for the glitterati. Yet he unstintingly paid the exorbitant hospital bills for a dying friend, then typically tried to prevent word of it leaking out.

If he has an obsession, it's guarding his privacy. And friends who want to remain friends with the once-hesitant youth who has grown into a forceful, middle-aged man know full well they must keep their mouths shut.

Weir is right: we have yet to see the best of Harrison Ford.

*HARRISON FORD*, by Minty Clinch, published by New English Library, \$39.95. Adapted by Rosalind Dunn. Copyright 1987 by Minty Clinch.

